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Basque Pioneer Women

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From the peak years of Basque migration to the present day, Basque women have made a distinctive mark on the landscape of the American West. Certainly, Basque women *(Eskaldun andreak)* have played a greater part in the survival of early Basque communities than Basque-American literature suggests. All too often, such literature features the "lonely Basque shepherd" who roamed the American West with his band of sheep. While it is true that a majority of Basques arriving at the turn of the century were men who intended to herd for a few years and then return to *Euzkadi* (the Basque

country), many changed their minds and decided to put down roots in the New World. In these cases the Mirentxus, Graciannas, and Maria Josefas whom they brought back from the villages of their homeland—became a critical part of Basque-American communities.

The sheep industry in which the Basque bachelor had staked his fortune relied on an elaborate support system for its success, provided in great part by a Basque boardinghouse network which developed along the North American railway system and in part by the Basque women working in those boardinghouses. During the earliest decades of Basque immigration to the United States from about 1860 through 1910, Basque men were particularly reliant on the boardinghouses, especially in the absence of a family life of their own. As the network of boardinghouses connecting the eastern seaboard to the American West became established, the demand for young Basque women to work as serving girls, housekeepers, and cooks in the boardinghouses skyrocketed.

By the 1920s, a female domestic labor market had been established alongside the market for bachelor herders. Margarita Aramaio Osa, for example, arrived in the United States in 1918 with a contract to work at Barbero's boardinghouse in Boise, Idaho. Her pay was to be eighteen dollars per month, but her duties would be multiple. Like other maids in the boardinghouses, she rose at sun-up, cleaned rooms and laundry, helped with odd jobs and errands at the boardinghouse, and served lunch and dinner to the boarders. Another contemporary, Lucy Aboitiz Garatea, began working at the age of fifteen at Zapatero's Aguirre Hotel in Boise. Margarita and Lucy have both recalled developing "housemaid's knees" from crawling on floors and stairways while shining them to their boss's satisfaction. Given the rigors of boardinghouse work, it is not surprising that a majority of these young women left the boardinghouses after two or three years of service.

In fact, the two-year work cycle that many young Basque women endured was complemented by the Basque bachelor's desire to court, marry, and raise a family in the New World. But he did not necessarily intend to give up shepherding to marry. Instead, many set up homes in small towns, or on ranches just outside of towns, which they left on a seasonal basis for pasturing their herds in the mountain passes. In *Sweet Promised Land* and *Hotel*, for example, author and son of Basque immigrants Robert Laxalt described how his mother Marie stepped in to run family business matters, discipline children, operate a small boardinghouse, and generally keep things going while "Papa" was in the sheepcamps.

Marie was not unlike other Basque women who have been accustomed to playing a major role in their family's economic life. When Stockton-Los Banos sheepman Talbot was on the range, his wife Elena Celayeta Talbot comfortably took up managing their business affairs in town, overseeing repairs and maintenance on ranch property and machinery, and often driving the camptender's truck to supply outlying shepherds and their bands. This tradition of "stepping in" is quite familiar to men and women in the Basque Country, where wives have taken on major economic responsibilities in their family's lives for centuries. In the Old World, wives and mothers in the fishing villages of Viscaya and Guipuzcoa have for centuries been accustomed to running their households without their husbands during the four and five month cod and tuna seasons. Thus, taking up men's work in the New World would not seem unusual to the Basque-American woman.

It has been argued by many that Basque women have been particularly adept at eschewing traditional female roles when necessary. An example is the story of John and Catherine Etchart. In 1912, John returned to his hometown of Aldudes to marry his sweetheart and bring her back to his ranch in the plains southwest of Glasgow, Montana. Years later, Catherine recalled wondering "What have I gotten myself into?" as she and John rode onto their expansive ranch for the first time. Such vast expanses, the distance from their cabin to the next neighbor's place, and the thousands of grazing sheep were all unfamiliar and somewhat intimidating sights to her.

Nonetheless, for two years, Catherine made their log cabin her home, cooking for passers-by including trappers, herders, and business associates. She began learning to work a ranch, including butchering and salting meats, preserving fruit, washing clothes by scrubboard, fencing pastures, and raising a vegetable garden, as well as four sons. Despite John's protestations that she was working too hard, and the fact that he had hired a cook, Catherine took her place at the stove alongside the hired girl. When John built a stone house in the Pyrenean style of her hometown, Catherine knew Montana was to be her permanent home and she embraced it with a passion. When John died in 1943, Catherine chose to remain on the ranch, taking over the books for the ranching operation and actively managing their properties until her death at the age of 90.

As one would imagine, many have heaped accolades on this Basque pioneer woman. For example, one herder remembered, "We'd always stop at the Etchart house, that was the custom of the day. Mrs. Etchart was like a mother to us." Or another, "When I came to America, I was sick,. She put me to bed right there in their home. She brought me food all day, just like I was her own son. She was a real lady, Mrs. Etchart, you'll never see another one like her."

While Catherine Etchart was unique in many ways, there are ways in which she was similar to other Basque pioneer women. That is, she played a critical role in family financial matters, in raising children in a new land, and in the development of the Basque-American community in her area. Among Montana Basques, Catherine became a matriarch. By looking out for younger Basques new to the community, she played a major role in the formation of that community.

Similarly, in Basque-American communities throughout the West, other women have assumed the role of community matriarchs. *Hoteleras* in established boardinghouses like Letemendi's in Boise, Martin's in Winnemucca, or Elu's in San Francisco, were often called upon to provide assurance for Basques trying to understand their new homeland. Lyda Esain in Fresno and Gracianna Elizalde in Bakersfield became *hoteleras* at an early age and, together with their husbands, established successful businesses that survived in those towns for decades.

It was not simply that The Basque Hotel in Fresno or The Noriega in Bakersfield were successful business ventures that makes them worthy of note. Not even that they became centers where local Basques came to discuss topics ranging from the price of wool to national sports and news, nor that they came there to celebrate and mourn together. What distinguishes them is that the *hoteleras* who had spent 35 and 43 years of their respective lives living and working in those boardinghouses established themselves as trusted confidants and cornerstones of their community. If one wanted confidential advice, emotional support, or even a loan, he or she would often consult Lyda or Gracianna before speaking to members of his or her own family. Despite the potential

burden of serving her community in this way for a lifetime, one of these modest matriarchs summarized her life in the following way: "These were the best years of my life . . . we worked very hard, we played very hard, and I was very happy." The role of matriarch—whether it be granted to a *hotelera* like Lyda or Gracianna, or to a *ranchera* like Catherine Etchart—was critical to the successful nature of Basque-American communities throughout the American West. These highly visible examples of *Euskal andra pioneroak* in theWest, together with their less well known female counterparts, have made a distinctive mark on the region's landscape.